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SUBJECT: MOHR BEGINS NEW MASS GRAVE INVESTIGATIONS

Classified By: Deputy PolCouns Ellen Germain for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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11. (C) SUMMARY: A Ministry of Human Rights team began a new series of mass grave investigations in Najaf two weeks ago and has so far recovered 70 remains, all Kurdish victims during the Saddam regime. They recently discovered a secondary site, which they think contains Shi'a victims. The team includes judges, prosecutors, and doctors from the Medico-Legal Institute. The ministry has just signed a memorandum of agreement with the Iraqi Red Crescent, which will provide doctors and forensic labs for future investigations. Security is provided by Najaf police, and Minister of Human Rights Wijdan Salim says the Najaf Provincial Council and governor are providing great support for their work. She hopes to continue opening more sites, with an emphasis on recent mass grave sites, and hopes to receive training and expertise from the International Commission on Missing Persons, which is funded through the USG. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) The Ministry of Human Rights (MoHR) recently began its first of a series of mass graves investigations throughout Iraq. The first site, in Najaf province, has already yielded 70 remains out of an estimated 100 total. Minister of Human Rights Wijdan Salim told PolOffs on June 21 that the victims are Kurdish and date to the Saddam regime. The bodies were all bound and sometimes blindfolded, and had bullet holes in the back of their heads. The team has also uncovered a neighboring site, which it believes is a separate site containing Shi'a victims. Local farmers have also notified the team of other possible locations in the surrounding areas. Wijdan visited the site on June 14 and held a media event highlighting the ministry's work.

13. (U) The team, headed by the MoHR, comprises judges, a prosecutor, and forensic doctors from the Medico-Legal Institute, a forensic and DNA lab in Baghdad under the Ministry of Health. Najaf police are protecting the site and the team during the excavations, and according to Wijdan, they have been professional and provided great services. She said the Najaf Provincial Council and the governor have been very supportive of the work.

14. (C) Minister Wijdan said the ministry had recently signed a memorandum of agreement with the Iraqi Red Crescent, which will provide the forensic doctors and lab for future mass grave investigations. Wijdan explained that while the MoHR works well with the Medico-Legal Institute, the institute is overworked with day-to-day work and does not have the capacity to take on more mass grave forensic data investigations.

15. (U) The ministry has only one team, but needs three more to be able to expand its mass grave investigations. Wijdan wants one team to be based in the KRG, one in the south, and two in the central regions. She emphasized that the teams need to focus on new mass grave sites in order to prevent potential chaos if individuals decide to start searching for family members, remains once Coalition Forces leave parts of the country. She identified the key sites as being in Anbar,

Diyala, Mahmudiya, Sadr City, and other parts of Baghdad.

¶6. (C) In order to investigate the large number of sites, Wijdan said the ministry needs training and expertise from the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), an NGO that has been awarded approximately \$2 million of State Department DRL funding to help the MoHR on mass grave investigations. Funding for the ICMP project will start in August. Wijdan emphasized that the teams need on-the-job training because they have already done classwork.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: The ministry has faced much opposition to mass grave investigations from religious endowments in the past, and that had delayed the Najaf project for a few months. Photos and reports from the project indicate a professional team and one that includes all necessary actors, including a judicial component. The ICMP project will be most helpful to the ministry if it focuses on increasing expertise of the staff, building capacity of new teams, and working directly with the teams in the field.
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